

JUST before the start of the home match with Boreham Wood on September 2, I overheard two Wycombe Wanderers fans discussing where their team would finish in the Isthmian League.

"I'm glad I had that bet with you that they would finish in the bottom half of the table," said one. "Yes, it looks like you're on a winner there," said the other.

Their pessimism was well founded. At that precise time Wycombe stood 21st out of 22, having taken only two points from four games, with some shaky performances.

But Wanderers won that game 1-0 thanks largely to a penalty save by Gary Lester. From that stage they never looked back and produced such an outstanding run that they ended up third — much to their own surprise and delight.

Excellent goals

But for their dreadful start to the season, they could have lifted the Premier Division championship for the first time in six years. Indeed it was not until the last ten days of the season that they were out of the hunt.

They won 22 and drew seven of their last 38 games and, thanks to a dramatic improvement in their away form, were able to exceed all expectations.

So manager Mike Keen can look back on great satisfaction of his first full season as a part-time manager. He has allowed his team to express themselves

MICHAEL KNOX reviews a season of renewal

and the players have revelled in this freedom to produce some brilliant displays.

"What really excited me this season, was seeing us score some excellent goals," says Mr Keen. "Two that stand out are Terry Glynn's one at Tooting and Jimmy Jacobs' lobbed goal at home to Hayes. There were four or five others as well."

Mr Keen has been criticised for not practising set moves in training. "We've scored numerous goals with three and four pass moves and that's the way I think goals should be scored. But I'm well aware of the importance of set moves and will concentrate on them more next season."

One disappointing aspect was Wycombe's failure to rise to the occasion in big matches. They performed well below their best in front of their two biggest crowds at Loakes Park.

These came in the F.A. Cup first round tie with Bournemouth, which they lost 3-0 and the first league encounter against Slough, which they lost 4-1. Mr Keen put it down to lack of experience in certain positions. They should be better equipped next time, he thinks.

Another disturbing factor was the high number of bookings and sendings off. By my calculations they incurred 27 cautions and two dismissals — probably an all time record for a club that prides itself on good discipline.

"This can't happen

again," says Mr Keen who is regarded as a great disciplinarian. "I don't like it and you will notice that the two people sent off, Hardwick and Price, are no longer with the club."

The main culprit of course was George Borg, who collected ten bookings. He had three in his first three games, so his final tally is something of an improvement. "I honestly believe that George is trying to do something about it. That's just as well because I'm not going to stand for it again."

Signings

Despite Wycombe's involvement in the championship race, the crowds did not come back. This may have been due to a run of away games after Christmas but cannot solely account for the average league gate of about 840.

Clubs at all levels have to face facts that barring a brilliant cup run, crowds will continue to decline. Wycombe's average is still probably the best in the division.

Realising this Wycombe have instituted a highly successful lottery, which has kept the club solvent and given them a solid financial base.

Mr Keen realises he must probably dip into these reserves to strengthen his first team squad, something he intends to do. He is looking for three possible signings, one at the back, another in midfield and the third up-front, where there will be a vacancy following Terry

Scott's departure to Germany.

With Keith Mead being released as a first team player, there is a vacancy at the heart of the defence. This could well be filled by promising 19 year old Anton Vircaus, who signed from Pressed Steel during the season. Mr Keen is hoping to get him on contract.

Vircaus spent most of the season in the reserves team, which was reinstated after a gap of more than ten years.

Although reserve boss John Maskell was disappointed with his team's sixth position in the Suburban League, the reformation of the Reserves benefited the club enormously.

The way such players as Chris Way, Phil Bycroft and Simon Dexter performed when called upon by the first team, was due solely to the fact that they had been playing week in week out and not sitting on the sidelines.

It also allowed players such as Howard Kennedy to make a gentle comeback after injury, before returning to first team duty.

These are exciting times at Loakes Park. Only last week officials inspected the ground, following their ambitious application to join the Football League.

The Wycombe schoolboys team captured the imagination of the town by winning the English Schools Trophy, and proving that the public will still come and watch local players.

Mr Keen, whose son Kevin was an integral member of the team, is hoping that their success rubs off on the Wanderers. "It must be our turn to win something next season."